

Letcher (S.M.)

MEDICINE,

ITS OBJECTS AND OBLIGATIONS.

AN

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE MEDICAL CLASS

ON THE 15TH MARCH, 1852.

BY S. M. LETCHER, M. D.

Professor of Obstetrics and the Diseases of Women and Children, in the Medical  
Department of Transylvania University.

LEXINGTON, KY.

PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF THE OBSERVER AND REPORTER.

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PROFESSOR S. M. LETCHER,

LEXINGTON, March, 24th, 1852.

DEAR SIR:

At a meeting of the Medical Class of Transylvania University, we, the undersigned, were appointed a committee to request a copy of your able and interesting Introductory Address, for publication. By complying with this, our earnest solicitation, you will confer a real favor on us, both as individual members and as representatives of the Medical Class.

**H. C. MERRIWETHER,  
JOSEPH SCOTT,  
MONTGOMERY PICKETT.**

Committee.

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LEXINGTON, March 25th, 1852.

GENTLEMEN:

I acknowledge the receipt of your very kind communication, requesting for publication a copy of the Introductory Address which I had the honor to deliver at the opening of this Session.

I thank you for the very flattering terms in which this request is conveyed, and cannot refuse a compliance with the wishes of the Class, as expressed through their committee.

Please accept for yourselves, "as individual members, and as the representatives of the Medical Class," my kindest regard.

Respectfully, &c.

**S. M. LETCHER.**

MESSRS. H. C. MERRIWETHER,  
JOSEPH SCOTT,  
MONTGOMERY PICKETT.

## INTRODUCTORY LECTURE.

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It is true, that such is the organization of our nature, moral, physical and intellectual, that man is, of necessity, the victim of many infirmities of character; and requires all the aids which an enlightened reason and an educated conscience can bring to his relief, to restrain him from acts of sordid selfishness, and *force* him to subserve the higher purposes of his being. Still there are lights as well as shades in man's character; and it is gratifying to the philanthropist to know, that he is also the subject of generous and benevolent impulses; and unites with the gross selfishness and sensuality of his nature, many high and ennobling attributes, which bear the impress of the Divinity himself.

If this be not true, *why* have *you* turned aside from kindred and friends, and all the domestic endearments, to undergo the fatigues incident to a protracted pupilage in a land of strangers? And *why* are you now assembled within the walls of this venerable institution, around which so many proud reminiscences cluster, connected with the lives and labors of its illustrious founders; *who*, consecrated both *it* and themselves, to the purpose of subserving the cause of human beneficence? We repeat the interrogatory, why then do we find *you* now in our midst? We respond negatively, that you are not here, in solemn pomp, to chaunt pæans to an exiled patriot or earthly potentate; nor to tear from the statute book of nations the laws of non-intervention, whose rigid observance constitutes one of the surest guarantees of our national existence. You are not here ready to invade a distant province, under the pretence of liberalising her institutions, without the knowledge or consent of her subjects; for the *very philanthropic* purpose of enriching yourselves with spoils, *crimsoned* with the blood of innocent and unoffending victims. Nor are you here in secret midnight conclave, to meditate treason against the Union, nor to pluck with impious hands one star from the national constellation; all of whose rays, when *united*, are destined to illuminate the whole world, and to teach the oppressed of all nations the great political truism, that men, by nature *are equal*, and competent to all the purposes of self government. No, no. No such unworthy and dishonoring motives have brought you together. Your purpose is a higher and a holier one; a desire to mitigate the ills to which flesh is heir; a zeal to extract the poison with which the cup of human misery is dashed; and to smooth, and to lengthen, and to illumine man's pathway through this dark, bleak wilderness of human woe.

This, gentlemen, is an enterprise worthy of the ambition of any one who seeks to give immortality to his own name; and rely upon it:



that he who keeps steadily before him the great objects contemplated by the profession of Medicine, will require no obelisks, no pyramids of granite, to perpetuate his memory; for it will live fresh in the grateful recollection of mankind, long, long after such perishable mementoes shall have been resolved into their original and elemental dust.

You have adopted a profession, which will afford full and delightful exercise to all the higher powers of the mind, and the amplest scope to the more benevolent and better feelings of the heart.

To be the genuine disciples of the healing art, you must not only have a heart to feel for another's woe, but a head to apprehend its source, and a hand *ever* ready to afford relief. In a word, if you wish to illustrate in your lives and character the true spirit of the profession, you must be not only wise but good men. We will not stop to elaborate an argument at this late day in the history of Medicine, to prove that philosophy and science, philanthropy and religion, should be the true basis on which medicine rests its claims to popular favor. Happily for us, medicine has passed through the dark ages of ignorance and superstition, and is disembarassed from all association with amulets, incantations, &c., and no longer addresses itself to a blind and ignorant credulity, but claims an equality, a sisterhood, with the other learned professions; challenges the strictest scrutiny, and demands a verdict in its favor, from the calm and enlightened judgment of men.

In medicine as in the other sciences, men *now* reason by induction from premises to conclusions—from facts derived from observation and experience, and *not from* assumed data, derived from occult and imagined qualities. Whilst the old system of medical philosophy obtained, the science made but little rational advancement. Its strides were measured and tardy; and had this system continued, medicine never could have attained its present proud position. Fortunately, however, for the cause of science, so soon as the rigid tests of a sound philosophy were applied, they at once exposed the falsity of those systems, and indignantly rejected them, as a mere tissue of metaphysical sophistry and chimerical nonsense. Medicine has caught the spirit of the age. Facts are now regarded as every thing; theory, unsustained by facts, as nothing. The time for professional romance has passed. The fruit is now preferred to the blossom; the substance to the shadow; and in this, the Augustan age of medicine, the mind of the enquirer after truth is no longer satisfied to grope its way through the mysticisms of nonsense, but *demands* something more solid, more matter of fact, on which to rest itself, than scholastic dogmas or metaphysical sophistry.

To this important change in the philosophy of medicine, we are mainly indebted for the multitudinous trophies, which have of late crowned the labors of those engaged in this great enterprise of human beneficence. Such, indeed, has been the success of those labors, that we are not only authorised to congratulate the profession, that great fundamental principles *have been settled*; but to express the hope, that truths, the most momentous in their character—truths, that



now lie concealed by a veil, too thick for our mental vision to penetrate, are yet to be evolved by the extension and application of those principles, if the same laudable zeal and sleepless energy continue to characterize the labors of the profession.

Little did Franklin, for example, suppose, when he first drew electricity from the clouds, that this fiery inhabitant of the air was to be domesticated by man, and to enable him to hold converse with his fellow man, as if face to face, *although* they occupy distant and antipodal positions on this globe: or scarcely could Pythagoras or Copernicus, who astonished the world with the vastness of their discoveries in astromical science, have dreamed, that even in a much more remote period in the world's history, all the complex motions of the earth, the moon and the planets—the causes of those phenomena and their consequences—would have been so simplified by the inventive genius of man, as to bring them within the clear comprehension of the most youthful mind. This honor, however, has been reserved for our own townsman. By scientific men, Barlow's Planetarium is now regarded as *one of the wonderful, mysterious triumphs of science in our day.*

Truly, this is a remarkable age in which we live. It is emphatically, not only the age of revolution, but of improvement—and if time would only permit, we could retrace the history of medicine, and demonstrate that greater improvements have been effected in the last twenty-five years, than in the preceding century. What, for example, did our fathers know of thoracic accoustics—or what did they know of the structural diseases of the pelvis—which have been revealed of late with so much clearness, by the application of physical diagnosis. In view therefore of these facts, who amongst us has a prophetic vision so strong as to be enabled to fix meets and bounds to the area of our knowledge, even at the expiration of a few brief years, if the same laudable zeal for the extension of that knowledge, continues to incite to industry and effort, guided by the safe and unerring lights of a rational inductive philosophy? Notwithstanding so much has been accomplished, it is equally true that much more still remains to be done. We have just entered the confines of a territory, illimitable in extent and boundless in resources. This is, indeed, a fairy land, beneath whose almost virgin bosom still lie buried gems as rich and as resplendent as those which sparkled in the coronet of a Harvey, a Laenec, a Louis, or a Davy. If then, you but do your duty, you may be the favored instruments, by whom some great truth is revealed, which will not only afford health and happiness to thousands of our race, but add lustre and immortality to your own names.

As all of you have been engaged for a longer or shorter time in this interesting field of labor, it would amount to a work of supererogation, to attempt to portray in living characters the high intellectual pleasure which is derived from the acquisition of knowledge, legitimately within the pale of your profession. Without intending, therefore, to enter into detail, we would remark by way of a solitary illustration, that we can conceive of no higher or more rational pleas-

ure, than that which thrills the Student of Medicine, as he unravels, for the first time, fiber after fiber, the various tissues which compose his own organism; notes their delicate structure, their nice adjustments; and perfect adaptation to the various purposes which they were intended to subserve;—and then with a correct knowledge of the laws of life, he can hold man up as a great transparency, and behold with astonished vision the infinite movements within this complex machinery—this microcosm of wonders, until he is lost in admiration, and is forced to exclaim in the language of inspiration, “truly, man is wonderfully and fearfully made,” and owes his being, alone, to the omnific wisdom of the Deity himself.

After you have engaged in the active pursuits of your profession, new and unfailing sources of pleasure will be opened to you. To sum them up in a word, they will consist in the fact, that you have contributed, in an eminent degree, to the happiness and relief of the unfortunate of your race—that you have discharged, faithfully, all the obligations which providence has thrown upon you—that you have lived not alone for the accomplishment of your own selfish purposes; but that you have also lived for the benefit of others—that you recognise in your professional creed, that you are not an independent, isolated being, wandering alone through this world—but that you are social in your character—a constituent element of society, and therefore, relative as well as personal duties devolve upon you. This, gentlemen, is the secret of all rational pleasure, both within and without the profession. Duty and happiness are indissolubly linked together; for the very obvious reason, that infinite wisdom has so ordered it. One of the severest punishments therefore, which can be inflicted on us here or hereafter, will arise from the consciousness, that “we knew our duty, but did it not.”

From what has been said so very briefly, in relation to the pleasures which you may expect to derive from the study and practice of your profession, we might render ourselves chargeable with a willful suppression of the truth, if we were to allow the curtain to drop here. The picture would be incomplete.

You are now, gentlemen, young;—your horizon is unobscured by a cloud—radiant with hope. The ocean of life is spread out before you in gorgeous prospect—unruffled by a tear or a sigh. Would that it might always remain thus tranquil and peaceful—that you might glide over its smooth waters, and reach the haven of your fondest hopes, without being overtaken by the storms of envy, disappointment or misfortune. Candor compels us, however, to state that it cannot be so—that this is but the delusive calm that precedes the storm. You are not only destined to live in a state of social ostracism, but must endure all manner of hardships and fatigues—confront the dangers of pestilence—live in intimate association with human misery—and have your best services required by the most frigid ingratitude.

This picture is no less dark than true; and when memory recurs to some of the sad scenes through which we ourselves have had to pass, we feel on this occasion like the veteran soldier, who bears on his person



the scene of many a hard fought battle; as he beholds his comradic countrymen moving on, column after column, to the distant frontier, to vindicate the national honor, his heart is thrilled with patriot joy. Still, when he recollects the hardships of a soldier's life, and the melancholy scenes of the ensanguined battle field, his bosom heaves a deep sigh, and the unconcious tear is seen to trickle down his manly cheek.

Having stated in very general terms the nature and objects of your profession, we have thought that it would not be inappropriate in this connexion, to allude to some of the ethical obligations which it imposes on its members. As philanthropy and benevolence were originally regarded as the basis of medicine, we would naturally infer, not only that a sound morality, but we might also add, a pure and undulterated religious sense, were regarded as constituent elements of medical ethics. Such was the fact. But, as we have already stated, medicine is in rather a transition state, and as great improvements are in progress in all its other departments; so also, is it true, that great innovations have been attempted in this interesting department of medical literature. Whether for weal or woe, we must all determine for ourselves. In order, therefore, to aid you in the formation of a correct judgment in relation to the comparative value of those innovations, we must contrast, for a moment, this department of science, in its present revised and improved condition, with what it originally was.

Under the old code of ethics, a sympathy for human suffering, wherever it was found to exist, and a desire to relieve it, irrespective of rank or condition, were paramount in the minds of the profession, to all considerations of personal elevation and aggrandisement.—Indeed, it is truly refreshing, in these days of general and professional degeneracy, to recur to the professional history of our fathers; to learn lessons of self-denial and devotion to the cause of humanity; and to have enstamped ineffaceably upon our character that nobleness of bearing, that purity of life, and rectitude of purpose, which should ever characterise the friends of human woe. The principles inculcated by it enjoined not only a sacred devotion to the cause of human suffering, and the most punctilious regard for personal and professional honor, but, also, the highest cultivation of all the nobler powers of the mind and better feelings of the heart. What else could we expect under such benign influences, than that a high order of intelligence, a cultivated moral sense, a scrupulous regard for truth, a jealousy of personal and professional honor, and a laudable ambition to become the favored instrumentalities in the promotion of human happiness, would all concenter most felicitously in the formation of the physician's character; and constitute him, indeed, an honor to his profession, an ornament to society, and a blessing to the unfortunate of his race.

Happy would we be if we could stop here, and not feel ourselves constrained to draw aside the dark veil, which conceals the wounds that have been inflicted on the honor and usefulness of Medicine, by thoughtlessness, ignorance, chicane and dishonesty; all of which are



traceable, as we conceive, to the practical introduction of this entirely new set of principles, into the ethics of the profession.

According to the new code of ethics, as we see it exemplified in the life and conduct of many of the profession, the ancient order of things is entirely changed. In place of a sympathy for human suffering, wherever it is found to exist, and a desire to relieve it, being regarded as the great objects contemplated by medicine—a sordid cupidity—a selfish desire for our own advancement in wealth and influence, irrespective of the rights of others or the honor of the profession—now hold precedence over all other considerations. The mere statement, therefore, of the leading fundamental principles of the two codes is sufficient of itself to demonstrate how dissimilar must be their practical results, both to the interest of the profession and the community at large. The philanthropic principles of the one dignifies and elevates Medicine in the estimation of the virtuous and the wise—reflects honor on the doctorate, and blesses society with its beneficence. The sordid principles of the other, we fear when traced out, will be found to dishonor the profession and reduce it to a mere catch-penny trade.

As one of the first and more natural consequences which we would expect to result from the principles last stated—we would not expect the members of the profession to harmonise, as those of the other learned professions; that they were not bound together by the strong bonds of a common brotherhood; were distant and dissocial; estranged by envy and hate; and engaged in perpetual and dishonoring strifes. Is this true, or is it not? Without intending to intimate an opinion, we ask you to visit any village or hamlet in the land, where there are more physicians than one, and enquire what their personal relations are, and then you will be qualified to answer the question for yourselves. This must always be the case whilst medicine is pursued solely for purposes of gain; for such is our peculiar organization, that the mind of man is so swayed by selfishness, that it can perceive no good to admire in those whose interest conflicts with our own—no fault to condemn in those who contribute to the accomplishment of our own purposes. Might we not also, in this connexion, advance one step further, and enquire if the various *Medical* institutions in the land; institutions, ordained of heaven, as we believe, for the general good of mankind; on whose pillars should be inscribed, in burning characters, charity and brotherly love; and at whose altars none should officiate but those with clear heads and pure hearts; are not also chargeable with the same sins; and that their office-bearers, those who should be our exemplars in everything which pertains to the honor and interest of Medicine, are engaged in dishonoring feuds, and permit no occasion to go unimproved, which presents an opportunity to inflict a fatal stab on their, perhaps, more honest and deserving competitors. This, in our judgment, is eminently disreputable; and if we wish to preserve our professional honor, spotless and untarnished, is it not high time that we were looking this common enemy full in the face; and were pouring upon it in unbroken torrents our honest indignation, until it is made to cower at our feet,

and is forced, from its own self-convicted infamy, to hide itself forever from the view of an enlightened and outraged public.

Again ;—if the exposition which we have given of the principles of the ancient and modern systems of ethics is correct, we are authorised in making the following deduction, viz: as the former inculcates the doctrine that when we take upon ourselves the vows of the profession, a high moral obligation is thereby imposed upon us to preserve at all hazards its true dignity; and enjoins the most scrupulous regard for personal and professional probity; whilst the modern system is more latitudinous in its provisions; sanctions departures from the great cardinal virtues, truth, honesty and fair dealing, and practically revives the old doctrine, that the end justifies the means, that everything is honorable in war.

Under the influence of the first named principles, Physicians would part with their birth-right, as soon as sully their professional honor—were kind and confiding in their intercourse—strict observers of all those courtesies that should exist among gentlemen—free from contumely and backbiting—ever ready to vindicate the character of a brother, when unjustly assailed—sympathising friends to each other when overtaken by misfortune—the sworn enemies of everything which smacked either of a sanctimonious or pretentious quackery—and relied alone on high professional attainments, united with a modest, dignified, unostentatious deportment, as constituting their only claims to the confidence and patronage of an enlightened public.

But alas! alas! how does the matter stand under the reign of this new fangled code? The profession, with many honorable exceptions, regard (as we have already stated) medicine as a mere money making trade, and resort to all manner of expedients to effect the one great object in view, regardless of all the claims of professional honor. We will only detain you with a few specifications which relate more particularly to the mode of acquiring business. It is quite common in this, the Augustan age of Medicine, for Physicians to place themselves in the ridiculous position of menials—to *hire* themselves out by the year, and to bind themselves, in a regular bill of sale, to attend families for stipulated sums; the price of course varying according to the estimate which the vendee places on the skill of the party of the second part.

This whole matter, as we humbly conceive, is wrong in every point of view in which we can regard it. It not only involves professional but personal degradation; is a virtual admission of professional inferiority, and an incompetency to compete successfully with the more meritorious of the profession. It is also unjust to the community, for the very obvious reason that those who get such services for a mere song, are those who are most able to return an adequate honorarium for those services. Again, it is right in morals, for all professions to receive a fair and honorable compensation (and nothing more) for what services they have rendered; and equally wrong, on the other hand, to receive any compensation, where no services whatever have been performed.

Thus it is, that a once proud and honorable profession, one which



could boast of its antiquity, its learning, its high toned morality, its beneficence, is dragged down from its high estate, below a level with the most inferior branch of mechanical labor, to gratify the cravings of a sordid cupidity. Competition on this basis is calculated to chill all the energies of the profession, and to repress a spirit of honorable emulation amongst its members. We are no longer required to put on the costly garniture of science, meet our competitors face to face in manly contest, and struggle with them for the honors and emoluments of the profession, on the score of solid, substantial merit. What incentive is there then, if this system of bargain and sale is continued, to stimulate the student to spend years in sleepless and laborious study, to enrich his mind with the great principles of Medicine? Or how can he, under such inauspicious influences, achieve a reputation for himself, or meet the high expectations of his friends? In place, therefore, of spending his time in laborious and profitable study, he will obey the animal instincts of his nature, and fritter it away in fashionable folly and frivolous amusements. Thus he is forced by the circumstances which surround him, to become a worthless drone in place of being a blessing to society.

If these facts be true, should not all of us who have sinned, or are now sinning, against the honor and dignity of medicine, renew our professional vows, and in obedience to the dictates of a commendable magnanimity, acknowledge the error of our course, and pledge ourselves, in the presence of God and man, that we will do so no more?

Various other expedients, quite as *honorable* as those referred to, have been resorted to at different times to effect the same object. There are those who believe that *the great culminating* qualification in a Physician, the one which towers above all others, consists in the fact that he has spent a year or two in some of the trans-Atlantic cities. No matter whether in revelry and fashionable dissipation or in laborious study. After this all they are required to do to propitiate popular favor, is to decry American Medicine, denounce their brethren as mountebanks, and asseverate with impudent emphasis, that they combine more skill than all the Physicians on the continent beside. Such too, now and then, is the richness and the profundity of the scholastic lore of these gentlemen, that they could not construct there consecutive sentences correctly, if their lives were to pay the penalty of a failure.

We do not wish it to be understood that we are disposed to underestimate the advantages which may be derived from the instruction of competent teachers or from hospital practice. Very far from it.—The idea which we wish to convey is simply this, that you may go to Europe goslings, and return full fledged geese. Or, that he who boastfully parades these supposed advantages before the public, as arguments to prove why he should be preferred over his brethren, only demonstrates that he himself is a brainless quack, or why resort to such unprofessional props to sustain himself? They very sagely conclude, however, that impudence is worth more than talents, and that the world is disposed to place the same estimate on men which they seem to place on themselves.



Underbidding is another expedient which is sometimes resorted to, to effect the same object, and goes to establish the novel doctrine that a Physician's qualifications are in an inverse ratio to his charges.

Finally, there are ten thousand expedients that are being used with the same view to procure the assassination of professional character, which your imaginations must supply, as their recital would constitute a work quite as voluminous as the British Encyclopedia. The principal means, however, which are used in this unnatural crusade, this voluntary fratricide, are detraction, falsehood, envy, and jealousy, all of which are entitled to a common paternity, either in a disappointed ambition, a sordid cupidity, or a perfect destitution of moral principle. This language, we are aware, is strong, and may grate on the ears of the more sensitive—nevertheless, *it is true*. When this warfare, therefore, is disrobed of its gaudy trappings, what else is it, in plain English, but dry-land piracy; and who are the actors in this drama, unless they be cold-blooded assassins?

It is truly mortifying to hold up to the public gaze, the dishonoring abuses which have crept into the profession of our own choice. But why attempt their concealment when they are observed by all men, and have given such an odor to medicine, that unless something is done, some disinfectant used to redeem it from those abuses, all decent men will become so disgusted with it that it must sooner or later fall into the hands of mountebanks and swindlers.

In referring thus briefly to some of the prostitutions of Medicine to the accomplishment of selfish purposes, even at the expense of personal and professional honor, we have not been prompted by a complaining or censorious spirit, but by the hope that you may see their degrading tendency, and exert your united influence for their correction. In view, therefore, of these facts, we invoke you to come to the rescue, and wipe these foul blots from our professional escutcheon. This is a matter in which we are all interested, vitally interested.—How can we expect to secure the confidence and esteem of mankind, if our profession be regarded as a system of brainless pretension and fraud? We again implore you for the sake of science, for the cause of humanity, and as a just tribute to the memory of those illustrious spirits who have expended their labor and their lives in erecting this proud monument to their greatness, to buckle on your armor, and never relax in your efforts until you shall have repaired its ruins, and have restored it to its own original granduer.

We have now stated as fairly as we could, the cardinal principles of the two rival systems of medical ethics, and have attempted to trace out some of their legitimate tendencies. Choose ye, therefore, between them.

In conclusion, bear with us but for a moment, whilst we urge you to be prepared to go forth into the world clothed with the panoply of a thorough medical education, sound moral principles, habits of industry, a spirit of harmony, and your success is placed beyond all contingency, without the necessity of resorting to strategy or fraud. These qualifications have a potency and a charm, which have not and cannot be resisted, because they are in exact unison with all those

ennobling principles which have been enstamped on our nature, by the great artificer of man himself. With your minds, therefore, richly imbued with learning, and your hearts warmed by the genial influence of a high moral and religious sense, you will have nothing to fear. Your destiny is fixed, your course will be onward and upward. And in the winding up of your career, how refreshing the retrospect, how priceless the pleasure, which will arise from the consciousness that you have done your whole duty; that your life has been spent in ceaseless efforts to ameliorate the condition of man, and to promote the honor and usefulness of medicine. What is ephemeral fame and ill-gotten wealth compared with this proud consciousness? They are as the mere bachinal revelings of an hour, compared with those pure and unfailing joys which are held in sacred reservation for the virtuous and the just. Amid the fluctuating scenes, therefore, of your future lives, stand firm *rectus in curia*, and submit, most cheerfully submit, to obloquy the most vile, poverty the most abject, nay surrender your life itself, sooner than plant in your own bosom, with your own hand, the corroding consciousness that you are personally or professionally dishonest. To have our integrity suspected by others, is bad enough; to know that we are dishonest, must be terrible beyond endurance.

On the part of our colleagues, we welcome you as co-laborers in this great cause of humanity. But remember, oh remember, and never lose sight of the fact for a moment, that we are rapidly passing away, and that you are soon to occupy the places which we now hold, and are to become the conservators of the public health and the public morals; that upon you, therefore, will rest the weighty responsibility, the high moral obligation, to tax all your energies, and never relax in your efforts, until the proud dome of that magnificent temple which has been consecrated to the cause of human beneficence, is lost in Heaven's blue concave, and is made to reflect health and happiness throughout the entire universe of God.















Ans J. O. M. D.  
Monday